

## Glimpses of Social History in Banabhatta's Harshacharita

Bhawna Rai

The word 'history' is derived from the Greek word 'istoria' meaning inquiry, research, exploration or information. It is an attempt to recapture however imperfectly, that which is, in a sense, lost forever.<sup>1</sup> The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the two supreme kavyas have been called *itihasa* by our ancestors. Yet they are not histories, but are only sources of historical information very much like the Homeric epics.<sup>2</sup> V.S. Apte's Sanskrit English Dictionary (1912) quotes the standard definition of *itihasa*: "*Dharmarthakamamokshanam UpadesasamanvitamPurvavrttam kathayuktam Itihagam Prachakshate*". what is known as *itihasa* is past events or ancient lore arranged in the form of stories in which duty or moral law, worldly well-being, desire, love and sex, and final deliverance or communion with god, find instructive application.<sup>3</sup> It is against such background that when we look at *Harshacharita* (7<sup>th</sup> Century), that supplies the information of society and early life of king *Harsha* and how he recovered his beloved sister and the royal fortune, it may be considered as a source of *itihasa*. During the Gupta period a new form of literature became eminent among the literary genius. It was a prose narrative either in the form of *katha* or *akhyayika*. The works of *Dandin* like *Dasakumaracharita*, *Subandhu's Vasavadatta* and *Bana's Harshacharita* and *Kadambari* falls under this category. According to *Bhamaha*, in the *akhyayika* the subject matter gives fact of actual experience, the narrator being the hero himself and the story is told in pleasing prose divided into chapters or *uchhavasas*. The work should contain metrical pieces in *Vaktra* and *Aparavaktra* metre, indicative of future happening of incidents; scope may be allowed to poetic invention, and the theme may embrace subjects like the abduction of a maiden, fighting separation and final triumph of the hero; and it should be composed in Sanskrit.<sup>4</sup> The *Harshacharita* is written in a fine Sanskrit by the court poet *Banabhatta* in eight *uchhavasas*, the main theme being the rescue of *Rajyasri* fulfills the criteria of *akhyayika*.

Along with the theme of the patron King *Harsha*, *Bana* also give his details in the first three *uchhavasas* viz. *Vatsyayanavamsavarnanam*, *Rajadarsanam* and *Rajavamsavarnanam*. He refers about his high birth in the *Vatsyayana* family, highly learned brahmin of *Pritikuta*; a loving son of *Chitrabhanu* and mother *Rajadevi*. *Raghavan* writes 'it is a literary performance in history as it reveals not only the life of the great monarch but also the life of a great poet, a biography and an autobiography in one.' The narration of the theme begins from the fourth chapter named as *Cakravartijanmavarnanam*. Here the author speak about the strength of *Harsha's* father *Prabhakarvardhana* in a metaphorical style: 'A lion to the Huna deer, a burning fever to the King of *Sindhudesa*, a troubler of the sleep of *Gurjara* King, a bilious pleague to that scent-elephant, pride of the *Latas*, and an axe to the goddess of fortune and glory of *Malwa*.'<sup>5</sup>

It also refers to the marriage of *Rajyasri* with *Grahavarman* of *Kanauj*. The description

of a royal wedding bears a close semblance with the existent wedding in present India. From the narration it becomes clear that it was a usual practice on the part of groom to ask for bride's hand. Again it appears from the physical description of the princess: "*Meanwhile Rajyasri gradually grew up in daily increasing familiarity with friends expert in song, dance and with all accomplishments. In a comparatively limited period she came to maturity. On her alone fell the glances of all kings, like arrows on the targe, and sending envoys, monarchs sought her hand.*" (HC, p.155), "*Our darling Rajyasri, my queen, is now grown a young woman. The thought of her, like her noble qualities, never for a moment leaves my heart.*" (HC, p.156) that fully grown up girls were preferred for marriage. In this context it may be mentioned that we find references of marriage of grown up girls in the literary works of Kalidasa, such as *Sakuntala*. But the fact that Rajyasri was a royal lady can not be missed. Child marriage was not common and that women of high birth occasionally put veil are narrated by the author. At the same time we learn from *Harshacharita* that women were given education in music, dancing and several other arts and were accorded a commendable berth in the society.

Again *Yasovati's* reply to the king on matters of their daughter's marriage that "Mothers, your majesty, are to their daughters no more indeed than nurses, useful only in rearing them. In their bestowal the father is the judge" (HC, pg.109), reflects the idea of patriarchal family and society.

Polygamy was prevalent is known to us when the Queen refers to her co-wives: '*sapatanimam sirahsu nihita ...*' (HC, Vpg.167). The fifth chapter '*Maharajamaranavarnanam*' throws light on the prevalence of '*Sati*' among the ruling class. The earliest epigraphic evidence of widow-burning is recorded in *Eran Stone Pillar Inscription of Bhanugupta 510 A.D.*, in the Sagar district of Madhya Pradesh, where the wife of general Goparaja, one of the army commanders of Bhanugupta died at this place in battle while fighting for the country against Huna, his wife immolated herself on her husband's funeral pyre.<sup>6</sup> Similarly many inscriptional sources of later dates like the Chhoti Khata Sati Memorial Inscriptions of 686 A.D., 688 A.D., 692 A.D., the Balaknath Temple Parmar Memorial Inscription of 1013 A.D., the Lohari Inscription of 1170 A.D. reveals the act of fire-bath on the funeral pyre of her/their husband. The Lahori Inscription refers nine widows of Jalsala performing Sati.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand in *Harshacharita* Queen *Yasovati* wished: "*Cambhuna tu hate kame tatpatni rtisnjnita Mumoha purato dristva patim bhasmavacesitam! Jatasnjna muhurtlena vilapa ha citradha Yadvilapad vane vapi samaduhkham abhut tada*", i.e. to die '*avidhya*' by immolating herself in the fire when *Prabhakarvardhana* was lying on his death-bed. This shows that *Sati* could be performed before the death of husband. Later we also hear the interrupted attempt of *Rajyasri* for self immolation. Widow remarriage was not in vogue but many lived a religious life or turned into nuns. *Rajyasri's* wish to wear the red robes also point to this fact.

The next two chapters- *Rajapratijnavarnanam* and *Kshatralabधि*- narrates the story of lamentation and reluctance to take the throne. Above all the news of the murder of *Grahavarman*, brother-in-law of *Rajyavardhana* and Harsha and imprisonment of *Rajyasri* by the combined army of Malwa and Gauda ; was a clear indication of the advantage taken

by the death of a strong ally of the Maukheris. Also it indirectly shows the inability of *Grahavarman* to stand against the coalition of *Gauda* and *Malwa*. *Banabhatta* then mentions about the departure of *Rajyavardhana*, his successful attempt to kill the ruler of *Malwa* and how he was treacherously killed by the *Gauda* King. Many scholars and historians laments on the incomplete and obscure information supplied by the *Harshacharita*, for instance the name of *Gauda* king, King of *Malwa* and Queen *Yasovati*'s brother's name who had presented his son *Bhandi* as an accompany to the princes has not been mentioned. According to P.V. Kane, '*Bana perhaps purposely omitted the express mention of the murderer of the reigning emperor's brother*'.<sup>8</sup> It is however said in the words: '*Prakatkalamudayaman-akasesasankamandalam*' (HC.VI.P 178) Here *Bana* alludes to the rise of the *Gauda* king *Sasanka*.

Just after '*the death of Rajyavardhana, who fell fighting for the defense of Kanauj, was, we surmise, used by Harsha for canvassing the ministers of that kingdom in favour of his own succession to the throne of Kanauj*'.<sup>9</sup> *Bana* writes thus: '*He was embraced by the goddess of the Royal Prosperity (Lakshmi), who... forced him, however reluctant, to mount the throne...*' (HC.pg.70) Under the circumstances *Harsha*, as the new king marched forward on his mission to avenge the death of his elder brother and "*for the subjugation of all the four quarters*" (HC.pg.197). It was during this time that he received a messenger, *Hamsavega* from *Bhaskervarman* of *Pragjyotisha* along with many valuables, for mutual relation. The discourse between the messenger of *Bhaskervarman* and *Harsha* were so framed by *Bana* that it did not hurt the pride of the new king nor did it underrate the importance of *Kamarupa*'s friendship. The last *uchhavasa* informs *Harsha*'s search for his sister and being able to save her right in time.

Dr. Dasgupta is of the opinion that *Bana* wrote *Harshacharita* "*more a romantic story than as a sober history*" of his patron and stopped when felt that "*his muse had taken a sufficient long flight*".<sup>10</sup> Similar view has been expressed by Keith, who thinks that *Bana*'s vivid pictures of the army or the life of the court and religious ambience of the time are faithful to history. But the poet was more interested in constructing a romance and not in presenting a faithful picture of his time.<sup>11</sup> The author is accused specially by Europeans, of writing an obscure and laboured style, often indulging in far-fetched similes and long drawn out double entendre.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, R.K. Mukerji has observed, '*though the historical value of the work as a whole is somewhat vitiated by its occasional outburst of hero-worship and flights of fancy, to which a poet laureate panegyric on his royal patron naturally lends itself, the line between fact and fiction is easily discernible*'. He further writes that on the whole, *Bana* as a historian is sometimes more reliable than the Chinese pilgrim. He further writes, "What we thus lack of political history is amply compensated by what we get of social history in the" *Harshacharita*.<sup>13</sup>

Similar analysis has been articulated by *Devahuti*, that *Bana*'s high-spirited depiction was due to the ornate fashion of his period but '*it is not very difficult to separate fact from flattery in the Harshacharita*'.<sup>14</sup>

*Bana*'s description is the first hand knowledge of the contemporary life, in the words of

Sreedharan. The information on the ploughing, rice and wheat crops, sugarcane enclosures, of the Persian wheel\*, of cut corn heaps ready for threshing floors, singing herdsmen mounted on buffaloes gay with the tinkle of bells bound to their neck, roaming herds of cows, troops of camel and flocks of sheep under the guardianship of camel boys, travellers blissfully sleeping after drinking the juice of fresh fruits, and of lovely groves where wood rangers taste the coconut juice.<sup>15</sup> *Bana* has depicted both the rural and city-life in his *akhyayika*. The customs and tradition of the period is also referred in the *Harshacharita*. Festivals related at the childbirth, *upanayana*, *samavartana*, marriages and religious ceremonies performed before starting the journey and the funeral custom are vividly described by *Bana*. *Harsha's* day-dream of burning lion and lioness, his throbbing of the left eye indicating some bad omen are described by *Bana*, the superstitions that still prevail in the present day, makes it more interesting.

*Prabhakarvardana's* advice : 'In their people, not in their kin, are kings rich in relatives',<sup>16</sup> to *Harsha* is so deeply meant by the experience King. Even the true reactions of the common people are very openly expressed, though the fields destroying the crops, they dismissing fear out of grief cried 'where's the king?' 'What right has he to be king?' 'What a king?'<sup>17</sup> It is learnt from the *Harshacharita* that *Harsha* completed his father's wish by conquering and annexing *Sindhudesa* to his kingdom in the third chapter. Further information like the subjugation of the Himalayan region, payment of taxes by them to acknowledge *Harsha's* supremacy and annexation of *Malwa* is furnished by *Bana*. The presence of feudal structure of administration is clearly stated in the *Harshacharita*. It mentions number of *samantas* such as *mahasamanta*, *aptasamanta*, *pradhansamanta*, *satrusamanta* and *pratisamanta*. These *samantas* paid taxes as well as render their services to the King.<sup>18</sup> The sixth *uchhavas* includes names of different rulers of different dynasty and some of the important events associated with them. He corroborates instances of twenty-eight kings who befell on account of treachery meted out by devious enemies.

*Bana* himself had a number of companions from all strata of life which reveals that caste system and intermingling was not so strict. Among his friends were a poet, author, two flute players, two musicians, painter, gambler, etc. people were content with their simple vocations. Every trade and profession were given their due cognisance without any disparity. He mentions about his two brothers from a *Sudra*: '*bhratarau parasava chandrasenamatrixenau*', which means anuloma form of marriages was common among the brahmins.<sup>19</sup> The work throws light on religious matter too, it describes about twenty-one religious sects; among the Brahmanical cult the *Siva*, *Sakti* and *Vaisnava* were popular; the *Lokayatika* sect<sup>#</sup>, Buddhism and Jainism were common. The people were virtuous, God-fearing and pious observing all religious festivals. Besides, information on education, dresses, ornaments of various kinds, forms of art, features of different race can be found in the *Harshacharita*.

*Harshacharita* gives valuable information regarding the society, culture and other aspects of the period. Considered as the first of its kind, it served as an example to the later days poets. *Bana* 'has woven the story out of actual events' and his masterpiece 'in fact is as much based on real events as *Scott's* *Quentin Durward* or *Waverley*'. It contains

'a living India at that time, just as we see in Arrian and Plutarch something of the India of Alexander's time'.<sup>20</sup>

#### Notes:

HC - Harshacharita.

\* Instead it should be Arahatta and not the Persian wheel. As pointed out by Irfan Habib, the geared Persian wheel with a bucket chain, which was moved by bullocks and could raise water from a deep well, was introduced in India in the period of Turkish conquest and the two subsequent centuries (thirteenth and fourteenth Centuries). Arahatta or araghatta is a gearless wheel carrying pots and buckets fixed on its rim, which could be operated on an open surface (stream or reservoir) for raising water of which the level was quite high.

# A form of Saivism

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